

- Defense Authorization Act Passes House with Wounded Warrior Act, Security Contractor Accountability, and Hall's Eye Trauma Treatment Act -

- Legislation Creates Centers of Excellence for Traumatic Brain Injuries, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Eye Trauma -

Washington, DC – U.S. Rep. John Hall (D-NY19) today hailed passage of a defense policy bill that includes Hall's Military Eye Trauma Treatment Act – legislation that creates a Center of Excellence within the Department of Defense specifically devoted to the prevention, diagnosis, mitigation, treatment, and rehabilitation of military eye injuries. The bill also creates Centers of Excellence specifically devoted to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injuries.

Eye Trauma Treatment Act

The House passed on Wednesday H.R. 1585, the Fiscal Year 2008 Defense Authorization Act Conference Report, which includes the House Version of H.R. 3558, the Military Eye Trauma Treatment Act. Rep. Hall was the lead Democratic sponsor of the bill, offered by Rep. John Boozman (R-AR03) in September.

"Serious eye wounds are some of the most common injuries coming out of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan," said Hall. "The Center of Excellence will help ensure that troops with eye injuries sustained in combat get the best and fastest treatment possible."

The primary responsibility of the Center of Excellence would be the development of a "Military Eye Injury Registry," containing up-to-date information on the diagnosis, treatment – including surgery – and follow-up for each serious eye injury received by any member of the armed forces while serving on active duty. The Registry will include input from optometrists and ophthalmologists from both the Department of Defense (DOD) and the VA, and it must allow for the electronic exchange of information with the Department of Veterans' Affairs. The Defense bill also establishes similar Centers of Excellence for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injuries.

"Eye injuries sustained in combat often require multiple surgeries and treatment," said Hall. "The coordination between the Department of Defense and the VA that this bill requires is crucial for the smooth transition from the military to the veterans system."

PTSD and TBI

The legislation requires the DOD to create a comprehensive policy to address traumatic brain injury (TBI), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health conditions. The bill will establish DOD Centers of Excellence on PTSD and TBI to improve treatment, research, training and rehabilitation, requiring enrollment and registry of TBI patients to ensure continuity of care. It will guarantee veterans a VA mental health assessment within 30 days of request, expand hiring to address the shortage in mental health professionals, and strengthen DOD training for better detection of PTSD.

Security Contractor Accountability

The Defense Authorization Act also includes provisions that Rep. Hall has pushed for to increase the oversight of private contractors in war zones. The bill would require that private

security contractors working in a war zone comply with military regulations and orders issued by commanders.

"Private security contractors have been running wild in Iraq for too long," said Hall. "This bill is going to change that, so if someone is in Iraq with a gun, the Pentagon is going to tell them how to use it."

Military Readiness

The Defense Authorization Act also helps restore America's military readiness by creating a \$1 billion Strategic Readiness Fund to address equipment shortfalls, fully funding the Army's and Marine Corps' equipment reset requirements, and authorizing \$980 million to provide the National Guard and Reserve critically needed equipment.

"America has the best military in the world," said Hall. "Yet the Bush Administration's policies in Iraq have depleted our resources and put a strain on our troops. Army readiness has dropped to unprecedented levels, and Army National Guard units have, on average, only 40 percent of their required equipment. Many stateside units are not fully equipped and would not be considered ready if called upon to respond during an emergency."

Wounded Warrior Act

H.R. 1538, The Wounded Warrior Assistance Act was included as part of the Defense Authorization Act. The legislation takes key steps to respond to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center scandal by improving the care of injured soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan – addressing many of the issues raised by the Dole-Shalala Commission and implementing several of its recommendations. The measure improves outpatient medical care for wounded service members at military health care facilities, begins restoring integrity and efficiency to disability evaluations and cutting bureaucratic red-tape, and improves the transition of wounded service members from the Armed Forces to the VA system.